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Team Player

ON THE COURT WITH TEAMMATES AND AT HOME WITH HER SON, WNBA STAR SHERYL SWOOPES LOVES TO SHARE LIFE'S PLEASURES AND CHALLENGES WITH OTHERS.

By JOEL HOEKSTRA

Four years ago, Sheryl Swoopes was playing a pickup game with some players from the Houston Rockets when she tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and the lateral meniscus cartilage in her left knee. The injury sidelined the basketball star for an entire season, and left Swoopes — one of the WNBA's original players and the top talent of the Houston Comets — wondering if it was time to make a career change. But whenever dark clouds of self-doubt swept in, the 6-foot-tall single mom found that a chat with her young son, Jordan, could restore her sense of hope and confidence. "We'd talk

about the injury and about what the future looked like," Swoopes recalls, "and he'd say, 'But, Mom, you can do it. You'll be OK. You're still the best.'"

Her return to the court proved Jordan right. In May, Swoopes, 34, began her ninth year with the WNBA, adding to a résumé that already included four consecutive championships with the Comets, three Olympic gold medals and Defensive Player of the Year titles in 2000, 2002 and 2003. Fans have voted her their top pick for five of the six WNBA's All-Star games. A legend in women's sports since her college days as a forward with the Texas Tech Lady Raiders, Swoopes was also the first woman to have a Nike shoe (the Air Swoopes) named after her. "As far as basketball goes, I've pretty much accomplished everything that I ever set out to do, and more," she says.

Swoopes's undeniable athletic talent has made her a role model for many sports-minded girls and young women. So has her upbeat attitude, which she sees as every bit as important as skill when it comes to creating a successful sports experience. "Everybody likes to win," she says. "Nobody likes to lose. But at the end of the day, the real question is: Did you have fun?"

A native of West Texas, Swoopes grew up depending on sports for fun. Her hometown, Brownfield, located 35 miles southwest of Lubbock, didn't have a lot to offer by way of entertainment, so young Sheryl threw herself into track, volleyball and basketball. Childhood victories came and went, but mostly she remembers the unwavering support and presence of her mother, a woman who singlehandedly raised four kids after Swoopes's father left the family when Sheryl was less than a year old. "As a kid, it meant more to me to see my mom in the stands than whether our team won or lost," Swoopes says. "She always taught me that while nobody wants to lose, there are lessons to be learned in losing."

That's a perspective that Swoopes has tried to pass along to Jordan, now 8, as he's become involved in sports. Whether it's soccer, gymnastics, basketball, ice skating or karate (he's tried them all), Jordan has proven himself an enthusiastic and competitive athlete. But Swoopes often reminds him that athletes grow the most when they're faced with challenges — situations in which their success is not guaranteed.

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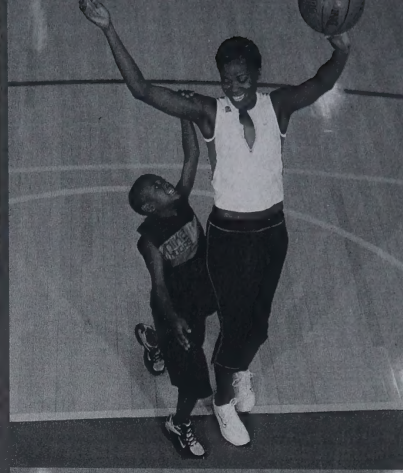
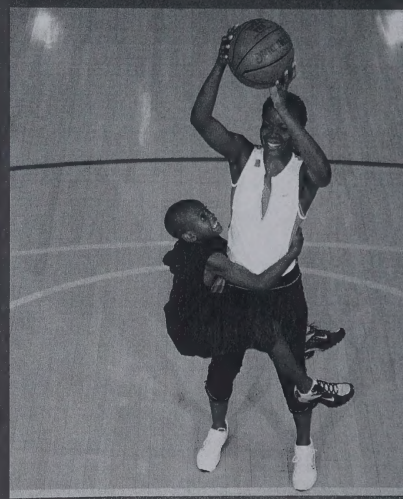
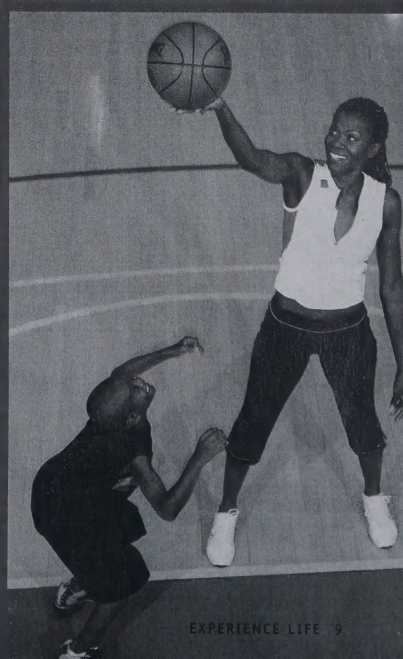
Swoopes knows firsthand that success is all the sweeter when obstacles are overcome. Take, for instance, her decision to sign with the WNBA in 1997: She sat out the first 19 games of the inaugural season, pregnant with Jordan, before making her debut six weeks after her baby was born. "I was still 40 pounds overweight when I began," Swoopes recalls. "My mind would tell my body something, but when I tried to do it, I couldn't. It took me a full year to get to the point where I was playing my best. But I wanted to be a part of the first-ever WNBA."

Basketball and kids remain Swoopes's two all-consuming passions. A few years ago she founded the Sheryl Swoopes Foundation for Youth, which promotes kids' sports and education in Houston. Off the court, she spends most of her time with Jordan. He sometimes comes with her to practice, and after-hours, they ride bikes, shoot pool, color pictures, sing songs and play sports together.

Swoopes takes her parenting responsibilities seriously. "People ask me, 'What's easier — being a parent or a basketball player?'" she says. "And I say, 'Well, I know without a doubt that I can play basketball. But being a great mom — that's a lot harder."







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